

Resistance, Politics, and the American Struggle for Independence, 1765-1775,

Walter H. Conser, Jr., Ronald M. McCarthy, David J. Toscano, and Gene Sharp, eds., Lynne Rienner: Boulder, CO, 1986, 565 pp. (out of print).

I beseech you to implore every Friend in Boston by every thing dear and sacred to Men of Sense and Virtue to avoid Blood and Tumult. They will have time enough to dye. Let them give the other Provinces opportunity to think and resolve. Rash Spirits that would by their Impetuosity involve us in insurmountable difficulties will be left to perish by themselves despised by their Enemies, and almost detested by their Friends. Nothing can ruin us but our violence. Reason teaches this. I have indubitable Intelligence, dreadful, as to the Designs against us; consolatory, if we are but prudent.

--Samuel Adams to James Warren, 21 May 1774 (p. [v])

From Chapter 1, "The American Independence Movement, 1765-1775: A Decade of Nonviolent Struggles," Walter H. Conser, Jr., Ronald M. McCarthy, and David J. Toscano:

Some years after his retirement from public office, John Adams paused to reflect on the nature of American colonial resistance to British rule. In a letter to Dr. Jedediah Morse in 1815, Adams described his feelings about the events of those earlier years:

A history of military operations from April 19th, 1775 to the 3d of September, 1783, is not a history of the American Revolution . . . The revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people, and in the union of the colonies; both of which were substantially effected before hostilities commenced.¹

In Adams' view, the American Revolution could not be explained merely as a series of military confrontations by which the colonials won independence from Great Britain. Resistance to British authority, as Adams well knew, had begun some years before 1775. It is this period and its events that brought about those changes that Adams found in the minds and hearts of the colonists. This first chapter of *Resistance, Politics, and the Struggle for American Independence* begins by reviewing the significance of this critical period before 1775, including the steps in the achievement of American independence accomplished in those years. After an overview of the three resistance campaigns of the era, the authors discuss the concept of nonviolent action and close with an introduction to the chapters that follow.

Historical scholarship also recognizes that colonial resistance did not begin with the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord. Nonmilitary opposition to British authority has its own history, beginning a full ten years before these famous battles. It is this decade of struggle to which Adams referred when he wrote of the alienation of American minds from Britain and the colonies' new allegiances. Historians and social scientists have described this period of colonial resistance, with its three major campaigns (against the Stamp of 1765, the Townshend Acts of 1767, and the Coercive Acts of 1774) in numerous articles and books. Some have gone so far as to suggest, as Adams did, that this decade was the most critical and creative period in the development of colonial grievances and movements in opposition to British colonial policy.

Many of these authors have been concerned with the development of the beliefs and ideas that supported independence. Others have studied military organization, the role of government institutions and ruling elites, and the periodic conflicts pitting class against class or the backcountry against the older settled regions. Scholars overlook, however, the degree to which the colonists used a kind of "weapons system" that operated without force of arms or violence in trying to compel the British government to change its policies.

As a technique of struggle, this weapons system is commonly known as *nonviolent action*. During their conflicts with Britain, the colonists developed and used nonviolent methods ranging from protest and noncooperation to the creation of parallel political, judicial, and executive institutions that challenged existing governments for ruling authority. Consequently, each of the major resistance campaigns contained not only a further development of the ideas of freedom and independence, but also a lively debate about how these liberties should be sought and defended. In turn, the means by which the colonists chose to defend and support their liberty had an influence upon the eventual shape of American independence by providing the organizational basis on which it rested.

Each of the three campaigns was prompted by Britain's introduction of laws affecting the taxation and governing of the North American colonies. Believing that their liberty and prosperity was threatened by these laws, many colonists were convinced that they must resist. They were, however, often unsure about the most appropriate and effective form of

opposition. Many viewed established constitutional avenues for redress as being incapable of achieving repeal of the offensive acts. Neither the statutes passed by colonial legislatures nor the decisions of colonial courts, for example, carried any weight in England. Moreover, the Crown often controlled the appointment of governors, officials, and judges, so that colonists in some places felt that the administrative personnel of their own governments were there to oppress them.

Even when the passions of the time led some colonists into crowd violence, the majority of the people found organized physical force unacceptable. Yet these same people often believed that giving in to the government in London meant, as they put it, trading the condition of free men for that of slaves. Clearly, another means of resistance was called for.

Believing some options to be ineffective and others unacceptable, the colonists explored and employed new techniques in their effort to effect changes in British policy. During the 1765-1775 decade, they used such nonviolent means as petitions, protest marches, demonstrations, boycotts, and refusal to work. When the Crown levied taxes on certain goods, Americans often refused to purchase them, or any other British export. In the words of leader John Dickinson, these boycotts meant “withholding from Great Britain all the advantages she has been used to receiving from us.”²

Other methods were devised as well. If colonial merchants violated popular sentiments by continuing to import boycotted goods, people not only refused to buy from them but also to talk with them, to sit with them in church, or to sell them goods of any kind. At times, colonial activists conducted regular business in violation of British law by using documents without required tax stamps, by settling legal disputes without courts, and by sending protest petitions to England without the permission of royal governors. They organized and served on local, county, and province committees designed to extend, support, and enforce resistance. In 1774 and 1775, many of these bodies assumed governmental powers on their own initiative, acting as extralegal authorities with powers greater than the remnants of colonial government.

Nonviolent action in these many forms was the predominant, but not the only, method used by the colonists to resist British power in these years. Even when opposing the most

oppressive acts, colonists never completely abandoned established constitutional forms of political action and redress. When possible, they worked through colonial agents in London, parliamentary contacts and appeals, and their governors to bring about a change of policy.

They also used extralegal methods that were neither nonviolent nor violent, in the sense that they involved destruction of property or material possessions without threatening injury to persons. The Boston Tea Party of 1773 is an example of such an act, as were crowd actions which, while tumultuous and even destructive, did not endanger the physical safety of their opponents.

Violent actions did occur as part of the American movement, however, but they have been greatly overemphasized and were of questionable value in countering parliamentary policy.³ The famous Boston and New York "mobs," as well as those of other cities and towns, did indeed turn out for every resistance campaign. They were rarely as violent after 1765 as during the first phase of the Stamp Act crisis. Similarly, cases of tarring and feathering, supposedly the crowd's chief weapon, have been shown to number fewer than a dozen throughout the colonies from 1766 to April 1775.⁴ All of these events, however, should be viewed within the context of a resistance movement that was overwhelmingly nonviolent.

Colonial nonviolent action was often improvised, particularly before the First Continental Congress of 1774 planned the final campaign of resistance in the Continental Association. The colonists frequently did not have a clear idea of what was involved in waging effective nonviolent struggle. They were at times confused about which steps to take when the impact of a particular method was lessening and often found it difficult to judge the relative effectiveness of a campaign. Despite these failings, colonial activists were acutely aware that some methods were more effective than others and acted pragmatically on that perception.

But, it can be asked, were the colonists actually aware that they were employing nonviolent means of struggle? Certainly such terminology did not exist in the eighteenth century, but, as subsequent chapters will show, there was an awareness on the colonists' part of the nature of the option they chose. At times, they knew they were choosing a method of

active self-expression, as in the case of a 1770 New Hampshire petition intended to show Parliament “that we have Sensibility to feel the Oppression.”⁵

In another case, a gathering in Massachusetts clearly demonstrated its support for means of action which neither accepted the injustice they perceived nor made a violent response. The Middlesex County Convention wrote: “There is a Mode of Conduct, which in our very critical Circumstances we wou'd wish to adopt, a Conduct, on the one Hand, never tamely submissive to Tyranny and Oppression, on the other, never degenerating into Rage, Passion, and Confusion.”⁶ (pp. 3-6)

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Most American historians have largely ignored the colonists' use of nonviolent action or have mentioned it only in passing. Those who have recognized its existence have generally been unable to interpret either the dynamics or the consequences of actions such as nonimportation, court closings, refusal to obey Crown authority, and other nonviolent resistance methods. One problem in such an analysis occurs, in part, because the colonists did not use the modern terminology of nonviolent action; words such as "boycott" and "civil disobedience" simply had not yet been invented. Another difficulty results from the tendency of people to view nonviolent action as a pacifistic stance based on moral and ethical belief rather than as a pragmatic means of political struggle. Given this common but mistaken view of non-violent action, it is not surprising that few historians would find examples of it in the colonial experience. Few activists of the time, however, justified their use of the technique on moral grounds; they were concerned primarily with winning redress of grievances. If the methods of nonimportation and nonexportation proved effective, they were employed. Despite the fact that colonists were not entirely conscious of the technique which they used, there was some recognition that violence was often an ineffective means of struggle. Even Samuel Adams, whom many contemporary historians associate with the tactics of violence, issued numerous statements prior to Lexington and Concord opposing the use of armed force by the colonists. In May 1774, for example, Adams cautioned colonial leader James Warren about the use of the tactic. Writing to Warren following his receipt of the Boston Port Bill, Adams warned: "Nothing can ruin us but our violence."²¹ The Boston patriot was not the only

colonial leader who counseled this way. The historical documents of the period prior to Lexington and Concord indicate a colonial concern that orderly struggle be maintained and engagements with British troops avoided.²²

The contributions of nonviolent struggle to this critical period of American history are also neglected due to scholars' frequent propensity to ignore particular events in order to support certain viewpoints. Researchers often look throughout the length of a period for evidence of what they regard as its inevitable outcome. Students of colonial history, for example, may be looking for the roots of war and find them in mass violence or military preparations. In the process, they will fail to realize that a conflict may be fought in many ways and may ignore the contributions of alternative means to the outcome of that struggle.

Scholars inevitably face critical decisions of detail and scope in their presentation of material. The editors of this volume have tried to present a full description of events, both nonviolent and violent, so that readers might draw their own conclusions about this critical decade of history. Some of the facts published in this volume are new and extremely revealing; others have already been recounted in other works.

This book is divided into two parts. In the narrative section of the book (chapters Two-Eight), the editors have attempted to bring the important events of the period together in one place. These chapters are chronological treatments of the resistance campaigns and the British responses to them. They rarely make use of the term "nonviolent action"; instead, both our British and American contributors utilize the terminology of the day in their depictions of nonimportation agreements, provincial conventions, and the like. To complement the descriptive accounts contained in the narrative chapters, the editors have included an analytical section (chapters Nine-Fourteen), which provides various interpretations of the events of the decade. These contributions attempt to answer some of the questions raised by the previous chapters and suggest some areas for future research.

The narrative section begins with Walter H. Conser's review of colonial resistance to the Stamp Act (Chapter Two). Conser outlines the colonial nullification campaigns and details the formation and enforcement of nonimportation agreements in the major ports. As he notes, crowd

activity of a violent nature did sometimes occur, but its impact upon the British decision to repeal the act was minor.

Conser's view that nonimportation was critically important to American success is supported by Paul Langford's chapter on the Rockingham Ministry (Chapter Three). Dr. Langford documents Rockingham's belief that Anglo-American commerce would be ruined if colonial resistance continued and details the campaign waged by British merchants and manufacturers in support of repeal. The pressure of British commercial interests, coupled with the ministry's brilliant orchestration of repeal testimony in Parliament, Langford claims, brought an end to the Stamp Act.

As Chapter Four and its Introduction indicate, a major reason for the passage of the Townshend Acts was political; Parliament wished to render civil government in the colonies more independent of popular rule. Leslie Thomas's work illustrates that colonial agitation again took the form of commercial resistance. Unlike resistance to the Stamp Act, however, nonimportation during this period was beset with difficulties, and debates persist as to its effectiveness. Ian Christie (Chapter Five), for example, argues that the British government was concerned more with the political implications of resistance, such as the breakdown of authority and perceived threats of violence, than with colonial economic sanctions. He claims further that nonimportation had little effect on British merchants and manufactures because of poor colonial enforcement and the opening of new British markets. Paul Langford (Chapter Seven) also points to the faulty implementation of nonimportation but believes the claim that British prosperity was maintained by the opening of new markets is overstated.

There is no doubt that the colonial activists made critical errors in the timing and execution of commercial sanctions during this period, but the evidence presented by Thomas suggests that certain colonial ports were nonetheless rigorous in their enforcement. In Chapter Nine, Ronald M. McCarthy and Walter H. Conser take a close look at the impact of commercial resistance and argue that the success of nonimportation is contingent on the following five critical factors: (1) the timing of economic resistance, (2) the effectiveness of enforcement, (3) the general economic situation in Great Britain, (4) the sectors of the British economy which were hurt and the impact of this injury, and (5) the ability of affected sectors to mobilize support in Parliament for

colonial demands. Conser and McCarthy believe that the campaign against the Townshend Acts, while not a complete success, was nevertheless significant in its implications for future resistance activities. This chapter, as does the earlier piece by Dr. Langford, suggests that it is extremely difficult to assess the economic effects of nonimportation and calls for more research in this area.

Whatever the deficiencies of enforcement found during the commercial resistance to the Townshend Acts, they were effectively eliminated during the next non-violent resistance activity of 1774-75. As David Ammerman (Chapter Six) illustrates, economic sanctions applied during this period were rigorously enforced throughout the colonies by extralegal local committees authorized by the Continental Congress. Great Britain, however, constantly underestimated the extent and character of the resistance. Both Paul Langford (Chapter Seven) and Ian Christie (Chapter Eight) explain that the Crown believed a small group of conspirators to be the core of resistance. This misunderstanding, claims Christie, provided a rationale for passage and attempted enforcement of the Coercive Acts.

Colonial resistance in 1774 and early 1775 was, of course, widespread, and nonimportation showed signs of significantly reducing trade between Britain and the North American provinces. Yet other powerful measures available to the colonists, such as nonexportation, were forgone until after the character of the struggle had changed fundamentally. Nonexportation, the method which many felt to be the most powerful weapon in the colonists' nonviolent arsenal, was never applied within the context of orderly resistance. Colonial failure to use this method earlier in the struggle against the Coercive Acts is cited by both American and British contributors in this volume as a crucial strategic error made by colonial activists.

The skill of the colonists in applying the methods of nonviolent struggle improved greatly over the decade. Similarly, the intellectual underpinnings of resistance in both colonial America and Great Britain were refined as well. Walter H. Conser (Chapter Ten) and C. C. Bonwick (Chapter Eleven) trace the evolution of religious and political thought in America and Great Britain and the role of the clergy in the movements of the day. Both chapters illustrate how proponents of change in both Britain and the colonies gave support to

each other through correspondence and action. J. H. Plumb's contribution (Chapter Thirteen), like that of Dr. Bonwick, describes the support for American demands within Great Britain. Significantly, however, this encouragement was eroded by war, when support for America became "tainted with sedition."

If the nonviolent movement for change was so successful, one might ask why this strategy was abandoned in favor of military resistance. In Chapter Twelve, David J. Toscano, Ronald M. McCarthy, and Walter H. Conser, Jr. offer a number of alternative explanations for the shift to war. This piece traces the ideological justifications for military resistance and sketches the development of the militia and the committees of safety. Understanding the nature of American colonial struggles is seriously compromised by historians' failures to investigate these developments in detail. Many have viewed the war as inevitable, desirable, or both. Consequently, they have not considered research on the shift to war to be important. The editors believe that investigation of these questions should proceed and present this chapter as a tentative guide for future research.

In the concluding chapter, Ronald M. McCarthy summarizes the research of this volume and describes the political accomplishments of the independence movement. His chapter provides a detailed analysis of the extralegal colonial governments and their development prior to April 1775. McCarthy further documents the view expressed by the editors that independence in many of the colonies had essentially been achieved prior to the commencement of military hostilities at Lexington and Concord.

This book does not propose to answer all the questions surrounding this decade of struggle. Certain questions of interest to students of resistance struggle have not even been raised here. How did the use of nonviolent resistance, for example, affect social structure in the colonies? What were the effects of the adoption of military means? Did the move toward military resistance under the Second Continental Congress serve to strengthen that institution as a central governmental body in a way which altered the decentralizing tendencies of the local and provincial popular assemblies? Was previous British support for American positions eroded by the change to military struggle? To what extent were certain segments of the American public alienated by the use of violence? These questions, and others like them, require serious

consideration and careful examination. The editors believe that they have contributed to the exploration of the critical issues surrounding the decade and hope that others will investigate the unanswered questions in further detail.

(pp. 16-20)

NOTES

1. John Adams to Dr. Jedediah Morse, 29 November 1815, *The Works of John Adams*, Charles Francis Adams ed., (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850-56), vol. 10, p. 182.
2. John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies (1767-68; reprint. New York: Outlook, 1903)*, pp. 29-30. See appendix B.
3. The case for the importance of violence in the movement is made by Richard Maxwell Brown, "Violence and the American Revolution." in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, Eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1973), pp. 81-120.
4. Bernhard Knollenberg, *The Growth of the American Revolution, 1765-1775* (New York: Free Press, 1975), p. 361, n. 64.
5. Nathaniel Bouton, ed., *Documents and Records Relating to the Province of New Hampshire from 1764-1776* (Nashua, N.H.: Orren C. Moore, State Printer, 1873), vol. 7, p. 250.
6. Middlesex County Convention resolution, 30-31 August 1774, L. Kinvin Wroth, et al., eds., *Province in Rebellion: A Documentary History of the Founding of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1774-1775* (microform publication, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), p. 886.
21. Samuel Adams to James Warren, 21 May 1774, "Warren-Adams Letters," Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections 17* (1917).
22. See Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution* (New York, Knopf, 1972).

From Chapter 2, "The Stamp Act Resistance", Walter H. Conser, Jr.:

As the end of the year approached and royal officials assessed their situation, they could only be despondent. "All of the distributors of Stamps between Halifax and St. Augustine have been compelled to resign their commissions," advised Charles Steuart, the surveyor-general in America. Moreover, according to the chief Customs agent of Philadelphia,

What has lately happened in New York (and the same spirits prevail as strongly here) is sufficient to convince us that it is vain for us to contend against the general voice of a united people. We have not the least hope of enforcing the act by anything we can do at present. . . . As there is not the least possibility of getting them [the stamps], we must submit to necessity and do without them, or else in a little time people will learn to do without them or us.¹¹⁸

Colonial officials were equally gloomy about their predicament. In a letter written on 26 December 1765, Samuel Ward, governor of Rhode Island, told the treasury officials in London that: "People of every Rank and Condition are so unanimous in their Opinion that the Operation of the Act for levying Stamp Duties in America would be inconsistent with their natural and just Rights and Privileges, injurious to His Majesty's Service and the Interest of Great Britain, and incompatible with the very Being of this Colony, that no Person I imagine will undertake to execute that Office."¹¹⁹ In describing the situation in Massachusetts, Governor Bernard likewise noted the determined opposition to the Stamp Act and concluded: "At this time I have no real Authority in this place, and am much in the hands of the People, that is, if it was to be known here that I received a power to distribute the Stamps, I should have my house surrounded and be obliged, at least, to give public assurances that I would not undertake the Business."¹²⁰ (p. 57)

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118. Charles Steuart to commissioners of Customs, 8 December 1765, quoted in Mary Alice Hanna, "Trade of the Delaware District Before the Revolution," *Smith College Studies in History*, vol. 2, no. 4 (July 1917), pp. 296-97; collector and comptroller of Customs to commissioners of Customs, 1 December 1765, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 295-96.

119. Samuel Ward to commissioners of the treasury, Bartlett, *Records of Rhode Island*, vol. 6, pp. 478-79.

120. Bernard to G. Cooper, 22 December 1765, "Bernard Papers," vol. 5, pp. 63-64.